

# Movie Theaters in Twentieth-Century Jackson, Mississippi

*By Jerry Dallas*

At the time of the 2000 national census, the city of Jackson was about 105 square miles containing 184,256 residents.<sup>1</sup> There was not a single operating movie house within the city limits. It is still true that Jacksonians who want to see a movie in a theater must drive to one of the characterless multi-screen complexes in the surrounding suburbs of Hinds, Madison, or Rankin counties. This is a distressing state of affairs for a capital city that once prided itself on its superior cultural and entertainment attractions relative to the rest of the state. Some current and former Jacksonians, particularly those over sixty, can remember when Rankin County “across the river” was generally looked upon as a moral cesspool set within a cultural wasteland.<sup>2</sup> Madison County and areas of Hinds County outside Jackson were considered just “country.”

Nearly sixty years ago, as Jackson expanded into a city of twenty-eight square miles with a population of slightly less than 100,000, it contained more than a dozen movie houses.<sup>3</sup> In those bygone days, “going to the movies” was as much about the theater building as the

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<sup>1</sup> This represents a 6.3 percent decline from the 1990 count of 196,637, which was a 3.1 percent drop from the 1980 figure of 202,895. *Clarion-Ledger*, October 27, 1991, and March 9, 2001, citing U.S. Census Reports.

<sup>2</sup> Even as recently as the late 1980s, the West Indian novelist and travel writer V. S. Naipaul was struck by one Jacksonian’s disparaging comments about Rankin County and its residents. V. S. Naipaul, *A Turn in the South* (The Franklin Library, 1989), 206-09. On the Rankin County Gold Coast’s unsavory reputation for violence, gambling and bootlegging, see Harold Martin, “Jackson, Mississippi,” *Saturday Evening Post*, CCXXI (October 9, 1948), 136, and Bill Minor’s column in the *Clarion-Ledger*, March 12, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *1950 Jackson City Directory*. The city expansion occurred in 1949.

film presented in it.<sup>4</sup> The demise of Jackson's principal motion picture houses during the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the earliest and longest enduring of which were located downtown, reflected Jackson's growing suburbanization and accompanied, if not the death, at least the significant transformation of the city's traditional downtown business district.

According to Fred Sullens, longtime editor of the evening *Jackson Daily News*, "motion picture shows commenced moving into [Jackson] around 1907."<sup>5</sup> Some of the early "picture show" theaters were likely simple makeshift affairs consisting of a white sheet for a screen and a row of benches in whatever building was available. But some early films were probably exhibited in Jackson's existing theater venues. The *1910 Jackson City Directory* listed four theaters—the Century at 510 East Capitol, the Dixie at 211 West Capitol, the Garden on East Capitol, and the Hippodrome at 117 North State.<sup>6</sup> The Garden and the Hippodrome did not last very long. The Dixie, which claimed to be Jackson's first "picture house," was a more enduring enterprise.<sup>7</sup> Dixie ads and articles sporadically appeared in the Jackson press from at least July 1908 until October 1915, after which the theater evidently ceased operations. It was not listed in the *1916 Jackson City Directory*.

The Century Theater became a Jackson landmark. Jacksonians who grew up with the Century, established in 1901, remembered it most fondly as a *real* theater, one that provided Jackson with the best touring

<sup>4</sup> John Margolies and Emily Gwathmey, *Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1991), 9. This observation was expressed from an entrepreneurial perspective by movie mogul Marcus Loew as "we sell tickets to theaters, not movies." David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981), 11.

<sup>5</sup> A Sullens article in the *Jackson Daily News*, March 2, 1952, warmly praises Katherine Bell Stevens's University of Mississippi master's thesis on "Theatrical Entertainment in Jackson." Evidently Sullens provided Stevens with a great deal of her source information.

<sup>6</sup> *1910 Jackson City Directory*. A 1909 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the Garden Theater located on the south side of East Capitol Street just west of where it crossed Town Creek. Mississippi Department of Archives and History [cited hereafter as MDAH], "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Jackson," MA/83.3/MS Reel No. 5. Note that these were listed as "theaters" *not* "movie theaters."

<sup>7</sup> The assertion of being Jackson's "first" movie theater was made in a Dixie advertisement announcing one of its rather frequent "re-openings." *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, April 27, 1915.

stage attractions.<sup>8</sup> But its life span as an exclusively live theater was relatively brief. By the fall of 1913, the Century began to show movies between its live stage performances, and films eventually became its major bill of fare.<sup>9</sup>

The Majestic was the most long-lasting of Jackson's early movie theaters. Owner-manager Houston Bowers, previously engaged in the



*Century Theater, c. 1940s. Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

mercantile business, opened the original Majestic Theater in a building on the south side of the 100 block of West Capitol Street (i.e., between South Farish and South Roach). This venture was so successful that Bowers decided “to enlarge his place of business” and construct a “magnificent” new building for his theater operations.<sup>10</sup> The new site was located on the north side of East Capitol between North Farish Street and Town Creek.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Thomas L. Spengler, Jr., “Time Was When the Fun Was on Capitol Street,” *Jackson Landmarks* (Junior League of Jackson, Mississippi, 1982), 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Don Mac Pace, “The Arts in Jackson, Mississippi: A History of Theater, Painting, Sculpture and Music in the Mississippi Capital Since 1900” (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Mississippi, 1976), 75-80. Stage shows, however, continued to be presented at least through the twenties.

<sup>10</sup> *Daily Clarion Ledger*, October 22, 1914. This was a brief article about Bowers and his motion picture operations. The original Majestic location can be inferred from “Jackson’s Glad White Way” column in the *Daily Clarion Ledger* of November 9, 1913.

<sup>11</sup> Lamar Street was not yet in existence.

On Sunday, September 14, 1913, both Jackson newspapers reported that Houston Bowers' \$30,000 "New Majestic Theater" would open the next day with a four-feature "Picture Program" and music provided by the Sara McLean Orchestra.<sup>12</sup> Although Bowers pledged that the "Old Majestic" would "continue as heretofore,"<sup>13</sup> it ceased operations by the fall of 1914.<sup>14</sup> Before its closing, however, it created a brief flurry of excitement by operating for a day as a "Negro Theatorium." Hostile white reaction, led by "West Jackson businessmen," quickly terminated that venture.<sup>15</sup>

Not long after the gala inaugural of the New Majestic, Canton businessman J. H. Livelar announced plans for the construction on Capitol Street of "a new and modern theater building to be managed by Houston Bowers."<sup>16</sup> The new structure, built on the lot adjacent to the original New Majestic, became its home. Designed in the "Spanish-Renaissance" style "similar to that of the Tulane in New Orleans," it cost \$40,000 and had a seating capacity of 1250. The old New Majestic building immediately to the east was remodeled to accommodate a "Woolworth five, ten, and twenty-five cent store."<sup>17</sup>

On October 22, 1915, the second New Majestic, owned and managed by Houston Bowers, held a grand opening for "the many anxious patrons of the old theatre and to hundreds of others who were eager to get a peep at the beautiful new picture show." Although primarily designed for movies, the new theater boasted a stage big enough to accommodate a large theatrical company, and a vaudeville performance was scheduled for the following week. The *Daily Clarion-Ledger* praised the new theater as "a credit to any city, no matter how large."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, September 14 and 16, 1913. *Jackson Daily News*, September 14, 1913 (typewritten synopsis in MDAH-Works Project Administration [WPA] File, "Jackson, 1910-1919"). The \$30,000 cost comes from the latter source. The *Daily Clarion-Ledger* did not specify the price.

<sup>13</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, September 14, 1913. By the time of its demise, the "Old Majestic" was generally called the "Little Majestic."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, October 22, 1914.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, May 13, 1914.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, January 7 and 18, 1914.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, April 11, 1915, and June 16, 1915.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, October 23, 1915. In this essay, the more modern spelling of "theater" will be used in preference to the older "theatre," unless the latter is part of a direct quotation. The Woolworth store opened next door at 126 East Capitol on November 26, 1915. *Daily Clarion Ledger*, November 25, 1915.

The Istrione and the Alamo, two Jackson movie theaters of rather long duration, began operations shortly after the first opening of the New Majestic. H. A. Carleton, former operator of the Dixie Theater, and J. C. Landon were the original owners of the 750-seat Istrione, located on the south side of the 100 block of East Capitol Street. A reporter who witnessed the Istrione's grand opening on June 15, 1914, described the audience of "Jackson's beauty and chivalry" as the "largest and most enthusiastic" ever to see a movie in Jackson.<sup>19</sup> Carleton later sold his interest in the Istrione to Landon and then organized the "Century Theater Company," offering "regular theatrical attractions, vaudeville and on off nights moving pictures" at the Century.<sup>20</sup>

The Alamo, Jackson's oldest, and for many years its *only* "Negro theater,"<sup>21</sup> was fully operative by early 1915. A *Daily Clarion-Ledger* article on the "growing bustling" Farish Street business area described the Alamo as a "moving picture house catering especially to negroes [sic]."<sup>22</sup> Arthur Lehman, a native of Canton, purchased the Alamo soon after World War I. Lehman was not satisfied with the "old run down frame building on Farish Street" and made plans to secure a nicer venue for his patrons,<sup>23</sup> but it would be some years before his dream was realized.

A few other theaters briefly appeared on the Jackson scene shortly before or during the early years of World War I. A 1914 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows a "Gem Moving Pictures" on the south side of the first block of East Capitol Street.<sup>24</sup> The Alcazar, which apparently ceased operations in late 1913, was located very near the Old or Little Majestic on the south side of the 100 block of West Capitol.<sup>25</sup> The Plaza

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., June 14 and June 16, 1914.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., October 23, 1915. Carleton, called "H.C." in the newspaper articles describing the opening of the Istrione, is identified as "H. A." in all subsequent citations. The *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, October 24, 1915, reported that the "Dixie, Mrs. H. A. Carleton, manager, reopens tomorrow . . ." It must not have remained open for very long.

<sup>21</sup> Blacks, however, at least on some occasions, were allowed access to the top balcony, or "gallery," of the Century Theater. See Tom Etheridge's "Mississippi Notebook" column in *Clarion-Ledger*, June 29, 1959, and "A Soldier's Guide to Jackson, Mississippi (August 1941)," MDAH Subject File—"Jackson Brochures."

<sup>22</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, March 9, 1915. One has to wonder if the phrase "catering especially to negroes [sic]" does not at least imply some white patronage during the Alamo's early years.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Lehman interview in the [Jackson] *State Times*, June 26, 1955.

<sup>24</sup> MDAH, "Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Jackson."

<sup>25</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, November 9, 1913.

Theater, an open “Airdome [sic],” debuted on Capitol Street in May 1916.<sup>26</sup> This seems to be the night-time open air theater on the Town Creek bottom described by Eudora Welty in *Jackson Landmarks*. She recalled that the “heavy attendance of mosquitoes at all performances” led to the quick demise of this venture.<sup>27</sup> The Alamo, Century, Istrione, and Majestic were the only four listings under “Theaters and Places of Amusement” in the 1916 *Jackson City Directory*.<sup>28</sup>

In April 1916 Jackson businessman and department store owner Robert Estes Kennington purchased the Majestic Theater from the estate of the recently deceased Houston Bowers.<sup>29</sup> A fire on January 29, 1917, caused significant damage to the Majestic, but it reopened some three months later larger, “brighter and more beautiful than ever before.”<sup>30</sup> Newspaper stories commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Istrione Theater in June 1924 revealed that it had also become “a part of the R. E. Kennington enterprises.”<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, in October 1917, E. V. Richards and E. M. Clarke, two officers of the Louisiana-based Saenger Amusement Company, which operated a chain of theaters throughout the Deep South, assumed management of the Century Theater.<sup>32</sup> Kennington later entered into a business arrangement with the Saenger Amusement Company to form Kennington-Saenger Theatres, Inc.<sup>33</sup> The

<sup>26</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, May 14, 1916. The ubiquitous Mr. Carleton was in charge of this newest Jackson theatrical enterprise. A description of an “Air Dome” theater is provided by Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 23. The Plaza was probably nowhere near as substantial as this depiction.

<sup>27</sup> Eudora Welty, “Jackson: A Neighborhood,” *Jackson Landmarks*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> They were also the only ones to appear in the 1922 *Jackson City Directory*. In conformity with the times, the Alamo was usually followed by “(c)” to indicate “colored.”

<sup>29</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, April 3, 1916. In an open letter to the Jackson public, Kennington promised Majestic patrons the best pictures, the best music, the best service, and also that “Kennington quality” (his department store’s slogan) would prevail. *Jackson Daily News*, April 8, 1916.

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 31, 1917, April 8, 19, and 21, 1917.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, June 22, 1924. Exactly when Kennington acquired control of the Istrione is not known.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, October 17, 1917.

<sup>33</sup> E. V. Richards, 1886-1960, became one of the top men in the distributorship and exhibition aspects of the American motion picture industry. By the mid-1930s he was president of Saenger Theatres Corporation and Paramount-Richards Theatres, Inc. On Richards and Saenger Amusements, see Mary Lilla McLure, *History of Shreveport and Shreveport Builders* (Shreveport: J. Ed Howe, 1937) 174-77, 403, and the Saenger Amusement Company website at [www.saengeramusements.com](http://www.saengeramusements.com). See also Lawrence McCann, “Madam Movie

Century, Majestic, and Istrione were all members of the Kennington-Saenger chain. Others would follow.

Evidently, Kennington's relationship with Saenger Amusements was not always harmonious. On March 8, 1927, Kennington joined Tom Hederman of the *Daily Clarion-Ledger* and District Attorney J. H. Howie in filing suit against the manager and dancers of the "Music Box Revue" for exhibiting a lewd, indecent, and vulgar performance on the stage of the Century Theater. Kennington's involvement in the suit might have appeared rather unusual since he was one of the Century's owners, but the *Daily Clarion-Ledger* explained that, while the "Hon. R. E. Kennington" owned an interest in the theater, he did "not control the selection of performances." Kennington's alleged prudishness provoked some criticism, but he also had his defenders, one of whom alleged that anti-Kennington attack ads in the local papers were "doubtless" paid for by the Saenger Amusement Company. In a sad and telling commentary on the times, the writer, who claimed to be a young white woman in the "overwhelmingly negro [*sic*]" South, warned that the provocative posters plastered all over town promoting the show might well arouse black men to assault white women, in which case Kennington's critics would be the first to form a lynch mob.<sup>34</sup> Apparently, however, outraged morality was one thing and business another. Kennington and Saenger Corporate headquarters may have viewed "Music Box Revue" in a different light, but their business partnership stayed intact. "Hon. R. E. Kennington" was still a vice-president and director of "Kennington-Saenger Theaters, Jackson" as late as 1953.<sup>35</sup>

The Alamo, Century, Istrione, and Majestic remained Jackson's only motion picture theaters throughout the silent-film era. Writer Richard Wright worked briefly for Arthur Lehman's Alamo Theater in 1925 when it was still located at 134 North Farish. Wright's Alamo employment lasted just long enough for him to steal fifty dollars in a ticket

Manager," *American Magazine*, CXLVI (August 1948), 51, 78-79. R. E. Kennington's theatrical holdings in Jackson were a part of the Paramount-Richards group.

<sup>34</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, March 8, 9, and 15, 1927. The "pro-Kennington" letter is in the March 15 issue. See also the *Clarion-Ledger*, January 8, 1961, for a brief retrospective look back at the entire history of the Century Theater, with considerable attention paid to the scandal surrounding the "Black Bottom" dance girls of the "Music Box Revue." After three days of testimony a Jackson jury returned a verdict of "not guilty" against the dancers and their manager.

<sup>35</sup> William D. McCain, *Story of Jackson*, Volume II, *Biographical Sketches of the Builders of the Capital of Mississippi* (Jackson, Miss.: Hyer Publishing Company, 1953), 17.



scam that enabled him to escape Jackson's threatening racial scene as well as his grandmother's religiously stifling home on Lynch Street and begin the odyssey that would take him first to Memphis and then on to Chicago.<sup>36</sup> In 1927 or 1928, shortly before "talkies" came to Jackson, Lehman's Alamo Theater moved to a new building on Amite Street, between Farish and Mill. The "New Alamo," as it was designated in Jackson city directories for the next ten years or so, was placed partly over Town Creek on "a foundation of reinforced concrete set in the creek bed." Long-time Alamo projectionist Edward Henry recalled that the neighborhood around the theater was called "mudline" because of the frequent Town Creek floods and the mud and debris left behind when it receded back into its banks.<sup>37</sup>

The Alamo remained on Amite Street for more than twenty years. Lehman later remembered that during the Depression he sometimes opened only on Saturdays, with adult admission prices as low as fifteen cents. Even then "it was hard to get as many as twenty paid admissions into the theater." He offered talent revues with cash prizes and later organized kiddie shows for Saturday mornings.<sup>38</sup> Ed Henry remembered that when the 1926 silent version of "What Price Glory" came to Jackson, it was advertised as having some sound effects; one of them was the backstage firing of a .45 pistol into a lard keg filled with sand to emulate artillery fire. It had worked quite well when the movie appeared at the white Majestic and even better at the Alamo, where the audience rushed out in terror.<sup>39</sup>

Eudora Welty grew up in Jackson during the silent-movie era. She later wrote that children in those "unhurried days had a vast inner life going on in the movies." At least once a week whole families went to the evening movies together, and children could go to the show by themselves on Saturdays and long summer afternoons. She recalled going to the Istrione (inevitably mocked as the "Eyestrain") one Saturday morning expecting to see the usual Western. Instead, she and an audience filled

<sup>36</sup> Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York, 1968), 73-74. Webb mistakenly refers to Arthur Lehman as "Abe Lehman."

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Lehman in the *State Times*, June 26, 1955. Ann Carsley article in the *Clarion-Ledger*, February 14, 1971. Ed Henry was Carsley's principal source for this feature story.

<sup>38</sup> *State Times*, June 26, 1955.

<sup>39</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, February 14, 1971. For more information on Henry, see Mike Alexander, "Jackson's Farish Street: A Neighborhood Built by Giants," *American Visions*, III, No. 4 (August, 1988), 35.



entirely with children were treated to a presentation of the dark and creepy *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.<sup>40</sup> The Istrione was built on the site of a former livery stable, and its patrons sometimes experienced the dubious thrill of having a rat run across their feet as they watched the film.<sup>41</sup>

Lehman Engel, who went on to national fame as a Broadway composer and director, was another young Jacksonian of the period. He later stated that the most important thing that ever happened to him was, as a young boy, listening to “Mrs. Sarah [sic] B. McLean’s playing to the silent films at the old Majestic theatre.”<sup>42</sup> Playing the organ or piano for silent films was a complex task requiring stamina and the ability to convey unobtrusively the appropriate mood and emotion. A former silent-film pianist described it as the “musical equivalent of a long distance runner.”<sup>43</sup> Once, when the power at the Majestic went out, Mrs. McLean’s orchestra had to play continuously for two hours but (according to the Jackson press) did it so well that the “immense audience never . . . grew restless.”<sup>44</sup>

Jackson movie theaters reflected and catered to the prevalent racism of the time and place. On September 22-23, 1922, the Majestic presented “One Clear Call,” a “story of the South,” climaxed by a Ku Klux Klan raid that, “as in the days of old,” purged the community of “undesirable characters.” Intentionally or otherwise, the film’s showing coincided with a Klan convocation in Jackson. In an obvious, albeit bizarre, publicity stunt, the theater management offered Klansmen free admittance to the balcony, providing “the Knights of the Invisible Realm [wore] their regular Klan regalia.”<sup>45</sup>

The “Talkies” came to Jackson on September 13, 1928, when the Majestic installed the new Vitaphone system and presented Delores Costello

<sup>40</sup> Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 36.

<sup>41</sup> Eudora Welty in *Jackson Landmarks*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, November 26, 1958. See also Lehman Engel, *This Bright Day: An Autobiography* (New York: MacMillan, 1974), 18. McLean was most closely associated with the Majestic, but she also played at the Century and theaters in New Orleans, Chattanooga, and throughout the South. *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 25, 1917. For more information on McLean’s rather lengthy musical career in Jackson, see Pace, “The Arts in Jackson,” 145-48.

<sup>43</sup> Margolies and Gwathmey, *Ticket to Paradise*, 68.

<sup>44</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 3, 1914.

<sup>45</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, September 20, 1922. On September 25, about 1,000 people attended Jackson Klan Number 22’s public rally in Poindexter Park. *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, September 26, 1922.

and Conrad Nagel in *Glorious Betsy*, a Napoleonic costume drama of “two lovers who defied convention.” In announcing and promoting both the film and the new technology, the Majestic promised its patrons that all future presentations would be a “full Vitaphone program.”<sup>46</sup> The Istrione, Century, and Alamo quickly followed suit and installed sound systems.<sup>47</sup> Silent films, in the words of Adolph Zukor, were “doomed” and quickly relegated to the past.<sup>48</sup>

While no new movie houses opened in Jackson during the relatively flush twenties, several did during the Depression-ridden thirties. By 1933 the Capitol Theater, managed by R. W. Tyson, was in operation at 215 West Capitol Street. The Capitol did not remain in business for very long, but its location would be home to three future downtown Jackson movie houses.<sup>49</sup> On June 11, 1935, Tyson and John Williams, formerly with M-G-M in Memphis, opened the State Theater at 223 West Capitol just one door east of the Edwards Hotel. The local morning newspaper extolled the new air-conditioned facility with 400 seats “upholstered in genuine Morocco leather [and] deep red and blue mohair” as “the last word in showdom.”<sup>50</sup> It did not remain the “last word” for very long, however, as Jackson was soon privileged to have a larger and even more luxurious theater.

On June 20, 1937, the Kennington Investment Company of Jackson announced plans to build a new 1800-seat Kennington-Saenger movie theater on the south side of the 100 block of East Capitol, site of the recently closed, old Istrione.<sup>51</sup> Original plans called for the new theater, dubbed the Paramount, to have a Christmas holiday debut. The Paramount’s premier had to be delayed until February 1938 and its seating capacity was cut to 1668, but its inaugural show was still a lavish and

<sup>46</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, September 9 and 13, 1928. On the development of the Vitaphone and other early movie talking systems, see Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 244-250.

<sup>47</sup> By this time live performances at the Century had become increasingly rare. For all practical purposes it had, by 1930, become exclusively a movie theater.

<sup>48</sup> Hall, *Best Remaining Seats*, 252.

<sup>49</sup> The Capitol Theater and its successors must have been located on or very near the site of the previously mentioned Dixie Theater.

<sup>50</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, June 11, 1935, and *Clarion-Ledger*, June 9, 1949. Williams purchased Tyson’s interests in the State sometime during the early forties.

<sup>51</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, June 20, 1937. The Istrione was still listed in the 1937 *Jackson City Directory*, so its twenty-two year history must have come to an end early in that year.

gala event.<sup>52</sup> The new theater was designed by local architect R. W. Naef. Whether or not Naef subscribed to the belief of noted theater architect S. Charles Lee that the “show”—meaning the sensory experience and aesthetic pleasure of going to the movies—began “on the sidewalk” is unknown, but the Paramount appeared to be constructed with that view in mind.<sup>53</sup> For over thirty years its triangular canopy-marquee and the tall vertical sign sprouting upward from it, all outlined with brilliant flashing yellow lights while within the vertical marquee the separate letters of “PARAMOUNT” blazed forth in alternating flashes, formed the visual centerpiece of downtown Capitol Street after dark. Interior amenities, in addition to the most modern and technologically advanced projection and acoustical systems available, included air-



*Paramount Theater, 1938. Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

conditioning, cushiony seats that promised the sensation of “floating on air,” and plush draperies and carpets from Kennington’s Department Store to accentuate the “straw and cardinal” color motif of the walls and ceiling. The *Daily-Clarion Ledger* lauded the new Paramount as “the finest motion picture theatre in Mississippi.”<sup>54</sup> This was perhaps a bit hyperbolic, but it was the finest in Jackson, and, although later challenged by the Lamar, remained so into the seventies.

Today one can hardly imagine movie theaters without concession stands, but these were a relatively new innovation, sparked by the Depression. Economics forced theater owners to cut back on such luxuries as uniformed ushers and seek additional sources of revenue and new ways to lure in customers; thus was

<sup>52</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 10, 1938.

<sup>53</sup> On S. Charles Lee, see Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*. Unfortunately, Valentine does not include a discussion of Jackson’s Paramount or any other Mississippi theater.

<sup>54</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 10, 1938.

born the omnipresent concession stand, with popcorn quickly becoming the item of choice. Popcorn was cheap and easy to make, filling, and the aroma well-nigh irresistible.<sup>55</sup> Popcorn also had the added virtue of generating thirst and thus boosting soft-drink sales. In any event, the question of which theater served the best popcorn was hotly debated among the movie-going public.

Meanwhile, in early 1937 the Buck Theater began operations on the site of the short-lived Capitol Theater.<sup>56</sup> In May 1939 a certain Van Downing circulated a petition requesting permission from the City Commission "to build a \$45,000 moving picture house and modern theatre on North State." The petition referred to Jackson's first neighborhood movie theater, the Pix, in Fondren, which began operations in 1940.<sup>57</sup> At about the same time, Arthur Lehman opened a new "Negro movie theater," the Booker-T, in a new brick building erected on the original Alamo site in the 100 block of North Farish Street. It was a small theater with a seating capacity of about 300, but, according to Lehman, "a great help during the war years."<sup>58</sup> By late 1940 plans were also afoot for the establishment of a new white neighborhood theater in West Jackson.<sup>59</sup> This theater, originally known as the Ray, at 834 West Capitol Street across from Poindexter Park, was in business by the summer of 1941.

In October 1941 the relatively new phenomenon of the drive-in movie came to Jackson. At first called simply the "Drive-In," it was located on recently constructed Highway 80, referred to in newspaper ads as "the New Clinton Boulevard"<sup>60</sup> An early manager was Mrs. Volenius Nichols, a "husky former school principal" who tolerated no nonsense as she patrolled the parking area bearing a pistol and a deputy sheriff's badge.

<sup>55</sup> Margolies and Gwathmey, *Ticket to Paradise*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> One of the earliest references to this movie theater was in "Streamlines," a Mississippi Power and Light Publication, dated January 17, 1937. MDAH—WPA File, "Jackson, 1920-1939."

<sup>57</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, May 7, 1939. The Pix does not appear in the 1940 *Jackson City Directory*, but a *Daily Clarion-Ledger* article on January 1, 1941, cited Fondren's rapid residential development that led to the construction of a "neighborhood theater." In a much later "retrospective" on the Pix and its successor, the Capri, it was reported that when the Pix first opened, it was a member of the Paramount-Richards chain. *Clarion-Ledger*, August 15, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> *State Times*, June 26, 1955. The Booker-T was listed in the 1940 *Jackson City Directory*.

<sup>59</sup> *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 1, 1941.

<sup>60</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, October 18 and 19, 1941. Years later, when other drive-ins were constructed, it became known as the 80 Drive-In. Sometime in 1941, the word *Daily* was dropped from the *Clarion-Ledger's* title and masthead.

Not surprisingly, she seldom encountered trouble even when confiscating liquor, which she customarily returned after the show was over.<sup>61</sup>

As the storm clouds of World War II drew closer to the United States, the War Department announced plans to develop the Jackson Municipal Airport at Hawkins Field into an army aviation training base for about 3,000 officers and men.<sup>62</sup> By August 1941, four months before Pearl Harbor, thousands of military personnel were stationed in Jackson, so many that city and army officials deemed it expedient to publish “A Soldier’s Guide to Jackson, Mississippi,” which listed various points of interest and places of (wholesome) entertainment, including movie theaters. The “Guide” also took the precaution of designating which facilities were available to African-American servicemen. In the movie theater category, these were the Alamo, the Booker-T, and the Century “gallery.” Ticket prices for blacks ranged from six to seventeen cents at the Alamo and Booker-T and six to eleven cents at the Century. Ticket prices for white customers varied from eleven to seventeen cents at the Buck, Century, and Ray to a “high” of thirty-one, thirty-six, and forty-eight cents at the Paramount.<sup>63</sup>

By December 1941 the United States was at war and more servicemen were assigned to the Jackson area. But even in war, Jackson municipal authorities, perhaps feeling the pressure of local pastors and the powerful Hederman publishing family, enforced Mississippi “blue laws” banning Sunday movies. This action provoked criticism and claims that the thousands of soldiers had only beer joints and honky-tonks—many of them “across the river” on the “Gold Coast”—for their Sunday afternoon and evening diversions. Although it was freely admitted that the blue laws were blithely ignored in other parts of the state, Jackson—or those who claimed to speak for it [i.e., Jackson]—believed that the prohibitions should be upheld “as a matter of principle.” One unnamed theater manager attempted to circumvent the “no-Sunday” movie ban from time to time. Although often arrested, he was seldom

<sup>61</sup> McCann, “Madam Movie Manager,” 51, 78-79. This article, a great deal of information for which was supplied by E. V. Richards, identified both the Drive-In and the Majestic as part of the Paramount-Richards chain, consisting of sixty or more theaters in Louisiana, Mississippi, West Florida, and West Alabama. Mississippi was supposed to be a dry state, but liquor was easily obtainable “across the river” on Rankin County’s “Gold Coast” or from Hinds County bootleggers.

<sup>62</sup> *1940 Municipal Services, City of Jackson, Mississippi*, 8. A bound copy of this work is in the reference section of the Eudora Welty Library in Jackson.

<sup>63</sup> “A Soldier’s Guide to Jackson, Mississippi (August 1941).”

punished. It wasn't until nearly three years after the war that state laws prohibiting Sunday movies were relaxed to the extent of permitting theaters to show movies between 1:00 and 6:00 p.m.<sup>64</sup>

Several theaters changed names and probably ownership or management during the war years. By 1943 the Ray Theater in the Poindexter Park neighborhood had become the Joy.<sup>65</sup> By May 1945 the Gay replaced the Buck at 215 West Capitol.<sup>66</sup> It lasted for just a few months before closing in early September 1945,<sup>67</sup> to be replaced less than three months later by the completely remodeled and air-conditioned New Joy.<sup>68</sup> Finally, near the end of the war or just afterwards, Dr. A. H. McCoy, a local black dentist, established a new movie house for blacks, the Ritz, at 610 North Farish.<sup>69</sup>

Newspaper advertisements and articles show that at the end of the war and through the end of the forties, the Paramount, Majestic, Century, Pix, and Drive-In were all part of a theater chain variously referred to as Kennington-Saenger, Kennington-Richards, Paramount-Richards, or Paramount-Gulf. The State, Joy, and New Joy were evidently independently owned and operated, as were Arthur Lehman's Alamo and Booker-T and Dr. McCoy's Ritz and Grand, the latter of which opened on Lynch Street in 1947.<sup>70</sup>

American movie attendance reached an all-time high in the years immediately following World War II. The boom didn't last, however, and by 1950 Hollywood was in serious trouble.<sup>71</sup> Various forces, of which the contemporary public was largely unaware, gradually undermined the economic vitality of the downtown business district and the theaters located therein. One was the increased availability and affordability of the

<sup>64</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, March 30, 1948.

<sup>65</sup> 1943 *Jackson City Directory*.

<sup>66</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, May 4, 1945. In that era, the word *gay* did not, of course, denote a particular sexual preference.

<sup>67</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, September 2, 1945, contained the Gay's last advertisement.

<sup>68</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, November 25, 1945. For a nostalgic view of the New Joy, see Anne Carsley's "A Jackson Memory," *Jackson: The Mississippi Magazine*, Vol. II, No. 5 (January 1979), 64.

<sup>69</sup> 1945 *Jackson City Directory*. The practice of designating theaters for African Americans with a (c) continued into the 1950s. Dr. McCoy is the person for whom Jackson's downtown Federal Building is named.

<sup>70</sup> The Grand is listed for the first time in the 1948 *Jackson City Directory*, but, according to the *State Times*, June 26, 1955, started in 1947.

<sup>71</sup> Joseph C. Goulden, *The Best Years, 1945-1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 198-204.

automobile, which contributed to the lure of suburbia, the development of suburban shopping centers, and later the enclosed shopping mall. Another was the improved quality, greater availability, and pervasive appeal of the new technological innovation of television. Between 1947 and 1957, ninety percent of American households bought a television set.<sup>72</sup> Television was relatively slow coming to Mississippi, but as early as 1949, three years before the establishment of Jackson's first station, Primos Restaurant offered its patrons "a treat the whole town is talking about": free television with their evening meal, "weather permissible."<sup>73</sup> WJTV began operations in late 1952, just about the same time that Jackson police reported the city's first known TV theft, when a set was stolen from a truck parked in the 300 block of West Pearl Street.<sup>74</sup> By spring 1954 Jackson had three television stations.<sup>75</sup>

Legal developments also had an adverse effect on the traditional single-screen movie theater. In 1948, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the control of Hollywood studios like Paramount, Fox, Loew's, and Warner Brothers over the production, distribution, and exhibition of films constituted an illegal monopoly. The major studios were forced to sell off their theater chains, and many local theaters simply could not survive as independents.<sup>76</sup> The decision's ultimate impact can be seen more clearly in retrospect, for few could have foreseen in 1950 that the days of Jackson's single-screen downtown picture shows were numbered.

Several Jackson theaters went out of business between 1948 and 1951, but new ones opened up, not all of them the fast-proliferating drive-ins. In August 1946 Wendell Black, executive director of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce listed "a new State Theater" as one of the city's future major building projects.<sup>77</sup> This was not a remodeling and renovation of the existing State structure but rather the reflection

<sup>72</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 163.

<sup>73</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, April 3, 1949. Primos had a number of restaurants in Jackson. The "free television" offer probably came from Primos Number Two at 1016 North State, just south of the old Baptist Hospital. Primos picked up its TV signal from New Orleans.

<sup>74</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, November 17, 1952.

<sup>75</sup> These were WJTV (1952), WLBT (1953), and WSLI-TV (1954). WJTV and WSLI-TV would later merge.

<sup>76</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 163. Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, 174.

<sup>77</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, August 7, 1946. Black was described as the Chamber's "secretary-manager."



of the State's owner-managers to build a separate deluxe "sister" theater in a different downtown location. In November 1947 construction began on this new \$250,000 theater, dubbed the Lamar, near the southwest corner of North Lamar and East Amite Streets.<sup>78</sup>

Meanwhile, Arthur Lehman, faced with the expiration of his lease on the Alamo's Amite Street building, decided to build a new 750-seat air-conditioned theater at the corner of North Farish and Hamilton Streets to provide "top movies and vaudeville for colored patrons."<sup>79</sup> When Lehman left the Amite Street site, Ad and Andrew Orkin, whose family owned the property, remodeled the building, put in new projection and sound equipment, installed wider more comfortable seats, and reopened it as the Amite in January 1949.<sup>80</sup>

Lehman's relocated Alamo theater opened on February 26, 1949, in a new building that it shared with a drug store, ice cream parlor, and shoe shop.<sup>81</sup> Throughout the fifties the Alamo presented its patrons with "some of the biggest names in show business," including Nat King Cole and Elmore James.<sup>82</sup> The "white" Lamar, constructed in the art moderne style, opened to considerably greater fanfare on June 9, 1949, with a presentation of *Little Women*. This new, 1300-seat, air-conditioned facility, graced by a Karl Wolfe mural depicting deep sea life, featured a "cry room" among its various amenities. While not the same as the supervised nurseries provided by the elaborate movie palaces of the early twentieth century, the Lamar's "cry room" did enable parents of small children to go to a movie without having to engage [or hire] a baby-sitter. Manager and part-owner John Williams promised Lamar patrons "first rate M-G-M and Universal-International films" while

<sup>78</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, November 30, 1947.

<sup>79</sup> *State Times*, June 26, 1955. The November 16, 1947, *Clarion-Ledger* contained a sketch of the proposed new Alamo. The quotation is from the December 5, 1948, *Clarion-Ledger*.

<sup>80</sup> *Jackson Advocate*, January 15, 1949. See also the *Clarion-Ledger*, December 5, 1948, and February 14, 1971; and the *State Times*, June 26, 1955. The *Jackson Advocate* story described the Amite as "the largest theater for colored patrons in the Jackson area." However, it had only 715 seats, while the Alamo had 750.

<sup>81</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, February 26, 1949.

<sup>82</sup> *State Times*, June 26, 1955, quoting Arthur Lehman. See also the website for Dorothy Moore's "Farish Street Records of Mississippi" (<http://www.geocities.com/ppinn/FSRHstory>) and Kermit Holly, Jr., "Reflections on a Historical Street" in *The Farish Street Historic District: Memories, Perceptions, and Developmental Alternatives*, compiled by Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson: Mississippi Committee for the Humanities, 1984), 12-13.

announcing that the State, the Lamar's older "sister" theater, would continue to show both first- and second-run films.<sup>83</sup>

The Lamar took its place alongside the Paramount as the "grandest of [Jackson's] white only downtown theatres."<sup>84</sup> But it had a serious and persistent problem, even during its glory years of the fifties and early sixties. Like the Amite, it was situated atop Town Creek, the flood waters of which would, from time to time, pour into the theater basement, causing damage to the wiring and electrical equipment. At least two such occasions were reported in the local newspapers.<sup>85</sup>

On September 21, 1949, the 51, Jackson's second drive-in, opened on the west side of North State Street, i.e., Highway 51,<sup>86</sup> just north of Eubanks Creek, with a showing of *Neptune's Daughter*. The Varia on the south side of Highway 80 just east of Terry Road began operations on October 22, 1950. Varia operator Jim DeNeve had been a movie theater manager in the former Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). After the collapse of Dutch colonial rule, he was persuaded by his brother, a Dutch pilot who had trained at the Jackson Army Air Base during the war, to relocate in Jackson.<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile Jackson's fourth drive-in, the Skyvue on Lindbergh Drive, just south of the old Overhead Bridge at the end of West Capitol Street, premiered on November 7, 1950.<sup>88</sup> These three new drive-ins, like the Highway 80 before them, were strictly "white only."

Meanwhile, on July 17, 1948, the "old" Joy Theater, formerly the Ray, across from Poindexter Park, presented its farewell film and was replaced the very next day by the "now locally owned and operated" Park Theater.<sup>89</sup> The Park's management seemingly made a valiant effort to make a go of the neighborhood theater. On October 9, 1948, the actor

<sup>83</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, June 9, 1949. David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, 210, described the Lamar as an "art moderne" movie house.

<sup>84</sup> Edward Cohen, *The Peddler's Grandson: Growing Up Jewish in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 124.

<sup>85</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, April 30, 1953; *State Times*, December 22, 1961.

<sup>86</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, September 21, 1949.

<sup>87</sup> An account of the Varia's premier is the *Jackson Daily News*, October 22, 1950. Information on DeNeve is in the *State Times*, June 26, 1955. The Varia was located slightly to the northeast of Mart 51, Jackson's second oldest shopping center. (The oldest was "Morgan Center," now known as Woodland Hills.) Initial plans for the \$1,500,000 Mart 51 included "an attractive new theater with a seating capacity of 1000." *Clarion-Ledger*, July 3, 1949. For whatever reason this plan was dropped. In any event, drive-ins ("movies in your cars, under the stars") were becoming increasingly popular at this time.

<sup>88</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, November 7, 1950.

<sup>89</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, July 17 and 18, 1948.

who played Little Beaver, Red Rider's young Indian pal (the ill-fated Bobby Blake) made a personal appearance on the Park stage.<sup>90</sup> Jackson's papers made no report on the popular response to this public relations move, but it apparently did not contribute much to the theater's durability. In September 1950, without any discernable press comment at all, the Park quietly gave up the ghost.<sup>91</sup>

Earlier in the year, the Paramount-Gulf Company announced that the venerable old Century Theater would close following a Saturday double-feature presentation of *Renegades of the Sage* and *Killer Shark*.<sup>92</sup> In yet another manifestation of the volatility of the local picture-show business, Dr. A. H. McCoy sold the Grand Theater to the white owner of the Sansing Grocery. *Jackson Advocate* editor Percy Greene lamented that McCoy's two theaters (the Ritz and Grand) had been part of only seven movie houses in the entire country that were actually owned and operated by blacks. "Now we don't have but six."<sup>93</sup> The Airbase Theater, established in 1949 at the City Housing Project in the World War II Jackson Army Air Base, burned in June 1950 and was not rebuilt.<sup>94</sup>

Toward the end of 1950, Pix Theater ads no longer appeared with those of the Paramount, Majestic, and 80 Drive-In (and before its closure, the Century) under the heading of "Jackson's Leading Theaters." Ads now billed the Pix as "your community theater," indicating that it had passed from Kennington-affiliated Paramount-Richards control to

<sup>90</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, October 9, 1948.

<sup>91</sup> The Park's last movie ads are in the September 23, 1950, editions of both the *Clarion-Ledger* and *Jackson Daily News*. The theater building was converted into a Ben Franklin Five and Dime, the roof of which collapsed in 1953. *Clarion-Ledger*, May 29, 1953.

<sup>92</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, July 2, 1950 [Clipping in MDAH Subject File—"Jackson Theatres"]. There was apparently no *Clarion-Ledger* story on the Century's demise. The Century's last ad in the *Clarion-Ledger* was July 1. Theater manager Mrs. W. F. Zetrouer, said she was not aware of the reasons for the closure, but it seems obviously related to the major studios being compelled by the Supreme Court decision to divest themselves of their theater holdings. Also, one might well infer from the movie titles a dwindling audience and that the Century had been reduced to showing something akin to third-rate, second-run, B-movies. At this time, Paramount-Gulf also managed and operated the Paramount, Majestic, Pix, and the Highway 80 Drive-In. It would soon sell or close all but the Paramount. Mrs. Zetrouer's position as the Century's last manager confirms E. V. Richards's preference for female theater managers. See McCann, "Madam Movie Manager," pp. 51; 78-79.

<sup>93</sup> *Jackson Advocate*, July 9, 1949. In 1955 the Grand Theater manager was Maurice Joseph indicating ownership by that prominent (white) Jackson family. *State Times*, June 26, 1955.

<sup>94</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, June 12, 1950. On this theater's opening, see *1949 Annual Report of Jackson, Mississippi*, p. 40.

local independent ownership. On June 19, 1951, Kennington-Richards Enterprises announced the sale of the Highway 80 Drive-In to James Alexander for \$85,000.<sup>95</sup> Less than a month later, the Majestic closed,<sup>96</sup> leaving the Paramount as the only remnant of the old Kennington theatrical “empire” in Jackson.<sup>97</sup>

Long before Kennington-Richards closed the Majestic, the old theater had become a second-run movie house and a poor cousin to the more opulent Paramount located directly across East Capitol Street. But the Majestic was also home to the popular Saturday morning Kiddie Matinee, which, besides the usual “shoot-em-up” westerns, the cartoons, and serials, featured a live stage show of local juvenile talent.<sup>98</sup> The Matinee continued its shows by simply moving “across the street to the Paramount Theater.”<sup>99</sup>

The loss of the Majestic was somewhat offset by the establishment of a new and much more elaborate downtown movie theater, the Royal Music Hall, in the old Century location. The new proprietor, A. L. Royal of Meridian, owner of a chain of eighteen theaters, air-conditioned the facility and remodeled and refurnished it in a color scheme of ivory, fuchsia, and geranium pink. He also announced “plans to bring an occasional stage show to the Royal . . .”<sup>100</sup> Two months after its formal opening, the new theater presented a vaudeville-style review featuring the Tex Benecke Orchestra with Eydie Gorme as vocalist.<sup>101</sup> Contemporary newspaper accounts give no indication of the success (or lack thereof) of this live performance, but few, if any, followed.

<sup>95</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, June 19, 1951.

<sup>96</sup> There was no newspaper story explaining or even reporting on the Majestic’s closing. Its last ad in the *Clarion-Ledger* was on July 15, 1951. Its farewell film presentation was “Oh Susanna,” a “rousing Western” starring Rod Cameron.

<sup>97</sup> On November 10, 1952, the *Clarion-Ledger* reported that William Deitenbeck had replaced Gaston Dureau as manager of the Kennington-Saenger Paramount Theater, indicating Kennington’s continued association with the theater.

<sup>98</sup> McCann, “Madam Movie Manager,” 51; 78-79.

<sup>99</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, July 20, 1951. The last Matinee presentation in the Majestic was July 14, 1951. The Alamo also hosted “Kiddie” stage shows. See the *State Times*, June 26, 1955, and Dorothy Moore’s Farish Street Records Web site cited in footnote 82. See also the *Clarion-Ledger* of February 11, 1992, containing commentary by Dorothy Moore, who as a child was a frequent performer on the Alamo stage. Evidently, the Alamo’s live talent shows were held on Wednesday nights.

<sup>100</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, December 19, 1950. The Royal had its formal opening on Saturday, December 23, 1950.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, February 19, 1951.

Theater managers tried valiantly to lure customers, but attendance continued to drop. The Lamar, State, New Joy, Booker-T, Alamo, and Amite offered free bus rides to patrons.<sup>102</sup> The Pix put the “Oscar” statuette on display,<sup>103</sup> and what in retrospect appears to be either an act of desperation or an admission of defeat, the “80 Drive-In” even installed a TV-room for its patrons.<sup>104</sup> However, neither publicity gimmicks nor such film innovations as Cinemascope, Cinerama, or 3-D could prevent downtown retail decline amid the growing popularity of television. Arthur Lehman blamed the current “tremendous slump” in the movie industry on the poor quality of recent pictures and the “invasion of television.”<sup>105</sup> *State Times* film critic Jane Petty complained that a city the size of Jackson could not “expect audiences for five or six weeks for one big film” and needed “more good films on shorter runs” instead of having to rely on dull, B-rated films the majority of the time.<sup>106</sup>

On March 13, 1954, the Paramount Theater announced the “final performance” of the Kiddie Matinee.<sup>107</sup> Apparently a growing problem of juvenile misconduct was a factor in the demise of this long-running Jackson tradition. The Saturday-morning adolescent crowds had always been rather rowdy and rambunctious, cheering loudly for each and every cartoon and throwing spitballs and popcorn, with the more daring folding their popcorn boxes flat and sailing them toward the screen. This behavior was generally tolerated and overlooked. But in early 1954 raucous juvenile behavior degenerated into sheer vandalism in some Jackson theaters; the Pix management required children and teenagers to be accompanied by an adult before being allowed entry.<sup>108</sup> Local theater operators reported that vandalism had risen to “unprecedented heights” in the past few months. One theater suffered the loss of more than 100 seats allegedly ripped and slashed by young hooligans. A

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., July 13, 1950.

<sup>103</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, July 4, 1954.

<sup>104</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, March 19, 1953.

<sup>105</sup> *State Times*, June 26, 1955.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., October 5, 1958. The lack of high-quality films was a problem. For example, when the Paramount celebrated its seventeenth anniversary with the Blue Ribbon Creamery providing free cake for all patrons, its feature film was “Ten Wanted Men” with Randolph Scott. *Clarion-Ledger*, February 11, 1955.

<sup>107</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, March 13, 1954.

<sup>108</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, February 5, 1954, in MDAH Subject File: “Jackson Theatres.” Ironically, the Pix neighborhood area of Fondren, Woodland Hills, and Cherokee Heights was considered one of Jackson’s most desirable residential districts.



*Paramount Theater, exterior and lobby, c. 1980. Library of Congress Historic American Buildings Survey/ Historic American Engineering Record.*



drive-in manager said that his establishment usually lost at least one speaker per night.”<sup>109</sup>

The New Joy folded less than three months after the Kiddie Matinee’s swan song. Although lacking the stage show, the New Joy’s Saturday triple features, three cartoons, serials (like the “Canadian Mounties versus Atomic Raiders”), and ten-cent price of admission for children under twelve had made it very popular with that set. Its passing deprived many Jackson youngsters of any reason for a downtown Saturday morning excursion.<sup>110</sup> The New Joy’s immediate neighbor to the west, the State, limped along until May 1956, when it also called it quits.<sup>111</sup> The Edwards Hotel later purchased the State building to accommodate construction of its new Patio Club annex.<sup>112</sup>

The Ritz and Booker-T black theaters folded about the same time as did the State. The *State Times*’ story on the State’s demise reported that Jackson now had “three downtown [white] theatres,” i.e., the Paramount, Lamar, and Royal; “one neighborhood house,” i.e., the Pix in Fondren; “four drive-ins; and three Negro houses (there were four earlier this year).”<sup>113</sup> The “three Negro houses” were the Alamo, Amite, and Grand. The Grand, however, did not remain in business for very long. It ceased operations in 1957 or 1958, was resurrected as the Ebony, and functioned for a few years under that name.<sup>114</sup>

The neighborhood Pix Theater called it quits sometime in 1957.<sup>115</sup> The Amite Theater, located in the building that served as the second

<sup>109</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, March 19, 1954. The context of these stories clearly indicates that the juvenile vandalism was a problem for white theaters. If black theaters had similar problems, they were not reported in the white press.

<sup>110</sup> The New Joy’s final ad, publicizing a triple feature of “Monkey Business,” “Montana Territory,” and “The Mummy,” is in the *Jackson Daily News*, June 5, 1954. An earlier New Joy ad boasting “seven shows for the price of one” (i.e., a double feature, the “Canadian Mounties” serial, three cartoons, and an “Our Gang” comedy) was in the *Clarion-Ledger* April 23, 1954. The adult (or over-twelve) tickets were thirty cents.

<sup>111</sup> *State Times*, May 11, 1956. Feature editor Norman Shavin, author of the “Aisle Say” column describing the State’s fate, wrote that “its closing, after many years operation, is an unhappy event to chronicle.”

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, September 25, 1958.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, May 11, 1956.

<sup>114</sup> The Ebony Theater was listed in the 1958 *Jackson City Directory* and survived into the sixties. Evidence available to the author does not indicate if the Ebony was still operated by Joseph family interests as the Grand had been in June 1955. For the contemporary status and condition of the Grand-Ebony Theater building in the 900 block of J. R. Lynch Street, see the *Clarion-Ledger*, January 11, 2004.

<sup>115</sup> The exact date is unknown since there was no newspaper story reporting the event. However, Frank Hains’s “On Stage” column in the combined *Clarion-Ledger--Jackson*



home of the Alamo Theater (and which, like the first, also jutted out over Town Creek), folded in 1958.<sup>116</sup> Thus, when the last year of the fifties rolled around, Jackson had just three white, downtown movie theaters, two (the Paramount and Royal) located on Capitol Street and one (the Lamar) just off it, two black theaters (the Alamo on the edge of downtown and the Ebony on Lynch Street), and four (white) drive-ins (80, 51, Varia, and Skyvue). There had been a net loss of seven from those in operation at the end of 1950.<sup>117</sup>

The awkward and misleadingly named Royal Music Hall did not survive into the sixties. On June 24, 1959, after a double-feature presentation of *The Giant Behemoth* and *The Cosmic Man*, the successor to the old Century Theater threw in the towel and called it quits. Newspaper stories attributed the Royal's folding to declining attendance.<sup>118</sup>

Thomas Spengler, Jr., a longtime observer of the Jackson scene, wrote that the Royal closed soon after showing *The Moon is Blue*, which shocked and offended many viewers because the heroine dared utter the word "virgin." Without actually saying so, Spengler implied a connection between the two events.<sup>119</sup> His memory, however, failed him on this point. To be sure, an indignant *Clarion-Ledger* reader blasted the film's "indecentcy" in a letter to the editor, but the *Moon is Blue* played at the Royal in September 1953, nearly six years before its demise.<sup>120</sup>

A film that generated a much greater hullabaloo, in fact a controversy that reached City Hall, was the Royal's presentation of curvaceous Jane Russell in *The French Line*, which featured a dance newspaper ads warned would "knock both your eyes out." City commissioner Chalmers Alexander, perhaps fearful for the public's optical safety, indignantly

*Daily News*, of September 15, 1957, makes it clear that the Pix was no longer in operation by that date. See also the *Clarion-Ledger*, August 15, 1999.

<sup>116</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, February 14, 1971. Evidently, the Amite had fallen on hard times by the late fifties. Edward Cohen compared the grandeur of such white theaters as the Paramount and Lamar with the shabbiness of black theaters like the Amite. "Everything about them seemed slightly run-down . . . from the cracked glass over the movie posters to the missing letters on the marquee to the half-burned-out neon sign." Cohen, *Peddler's Grandson*, 210. The Amite was located almost directly behind the Cohen Brothers Clothing Store on downtown West Capitol Street.

<sup>117</sup> The 1950 *Jackson City Directory* listed fourteen theaters, including the defunct Park. But it did not include the new Royal Music Hall or the new Varia and Skyvue drive-ins.

<sup>118</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, June 24, 1959, *Clarion-Ledger*, June 25, 1959. To the probable chagrin of many Jackson males, the Royal's expiration cancelled the scheduled presentation of Brigitte Bardot in "The Light Across the Street."

<sup>119</sup> Spengler, *Jackson Landmarks*, 11-13.

<sup>120</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, September 14, 1953.

proposed to ban the film. But despite his fulminations, *The French Line* ran at the Royal for more than two weeks, a rather lengthy engagement for Jackson, and following that at the Skyvue and Varia drive-ins.<sup>121</sup>

City Hall censorship, or at least City Hall pressure not to transgress certain taboos, did, however, create a real problem for Jackson theater operators. The two most volatile and delicate topics were the interrelated issues of race and Mississippi's image. Before the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 decision declaring school segregation unconstitutional—that is, when segregation and white supremacy were regarded as the natural and permanent order of things in Mississippi—Jackson theaters (both white and black) showed films with a “racial” theme or angle without arousing a stir or attracting much notice.

*Home of the Brave*, a film depicting racism during World War II ran without incident at the Paramount in October 1949 and two months later at the Alamo.

In January 1950 the Alamo presented *Lost Boundaries*, another film exploring contemporary American racial problems.<sup>122</sup> *Pinky*, the story of a black girl who “passed for white,” played at the Lamar in February 1950 without arousing any discernable protest or controversy.<sup>123</sup> This film was based on the novel *Quality*, written by Cid Ricketts Sumner, nee Bertha Ricketts, a former Jackson resident and teacher at Central High School and Millsaps College. Fred Sullens, as fiery a segregationist as ever there was, warmly praised the novel for its depiction of the “unpleasant” miscegenation aspect of the race question.<sup>124</sup>

This atmosphere of tolerance, forbearance, or benign neglect—however it may be defined—came to an abrupt end after the *Brown vs. Board*

<sup>121</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, July 4, 1954, and July 17, 1954; *Clarion-Ledger*, August 28, 1954.

<sup>122</sup> An ad for the Paramount's showing of “Home of the Brave” is in the *Clarion-Ledger*, October 16, 1949. An ad for the Alamo's presentation of the same film is in one of the late December editions of the weekly *Jackson Advocate*. An Alamo ad for “Lost Boundaries” is in the January 28, 1950 issue of the *Jackson Advocate*. A present-day Internet source states that “Lost Boundaries” was banned in Atlanta and Memphis. The Alamo very seldom advertised in the *Advocate*, at least in the later forties and early fifties, and when it did it was usually for films with a “racial” theme.

<sup>123</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, February 12, 1950.

<sup>124</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, September 9, 1946. Ms. Sumner is best known for her *Tammy* novels which were later turned into commercially successful movies starring Debbie Reynolds. See James Lloyd (ed.), *Lives of Mississippi Authors, 1817-1967* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), pp. 426-428. For a native Jacksonian's recollections of Miss Bertha Ricketts as a young teacher at Jackson's Central High School, see Julian B. Feibelman, *The Making of a Rabbi* (New York: Vantage Press, 1980), pp. 66-69.

of *Education* decision as the white power structure circled the wagons, as it were, in defense of the status quo against “outside intervention.” The first movie to provoke official City Hall as well as organized religious opposition was Elia Kazan’s film adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s *Baby Doll*. In a meeting with Lamar owner-operator John Williams, Varia manager Jim DeNeve, local clergymen, the president of the Jackson PTA Council, city officials—with Commissioner Alexander leading the charge—threatened legal action if the Lamar went through with its scheduled presentation of the film. Williams and DeNeve complained that members of this ad hoc vigilante purity committee were condemning something they had not even seen, an argument that didn’t wash with the City Council, which perhaps felt the pressure and feared the potential wrath of watchful clergymen. The pastor of the First Presbyterian Church stated that “Jackson should not take its tone from New York or Chicago” and warned that “we [?] don’t intend to let things like this go by.” The good reverend did not explain who “we” referred to, but the implication was obvious. The assistant pastor of the First Baptist Church was not quite so intimidating but declared that “Jackson is different” and he wanted “to see it remain different. Let’s play it safe and not let certain things come into our city.”<sup>125</sup>

Opposition to *Baby Doll* was ostensibly due to its allegedly lewd sexual content. A later newspaper story described it as a film dealing with the “sex antics of a low-class Mississippi family.”<sup>126</sup> Mayor Allen Thompson called it “one of the most rotten things to come along in a long time”<sup>127</sup> and warned that, if it were shown, “we might have strip-tease shows on Capitol Street.” But perhaps equally threatening to local political and religious leaders was the film’s negative depiction of Mississippi and Mississippians. One reporter even dared ask Mayor Thompson if official opposition to the movie was due to its harsh portrayal of so-called Mississippi “white trash.” The Mayor “merely smiled” and made no attempt to answer the question.<sup>128</sup> In any event, City Hall pressure,

<sup>125</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, January 5, 1957.

<sup>126</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, March 9, 1959.

<sup>127</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, January 11, 1957.

<sup>128</sup> *Clarion-Ledger-Jackson Daily News*, January 6, 1957. By this time the Hederman family owned both the *Clarion-Ledger* and the *Daily News*. Hederman employees seldom had the gumption to ask the type of question put to Mayor Thompson or any other white official trying to preserve the “Mississippi way.” On the alleged role of the Hederman Press in promoting segregation, fundamentalism, and the status quo, see Robert Canzoneri, “*I Do So Politely: A Voice From the South*” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 107-08, and Lew Powell, “A Bad Press in Mississippi,” *The Nation*, Vol. 217 (October 8, 1973), 331-34.

reinforced by church and PTA leaders, was sufficient to force Williams to cancel *Baby Doll*, which was not shown in Jackson until years later after significant social and political changes had taken place.

On the eve of the Royal's demise its manager, George Pollitz, complained that "clandestine" City Hall racial censorship denied Jackson access to some current top movies. The Royal had scheduled and advertised *Kings Go Forth*, a movie depicting a romance between a white man and a mulatto, but because of official pressure, about which Mayor Thompson claimed to know nothing, it had to be cancelled. Other theater managers, although requesting anonymity lest they be branded as "integrationists" confirmed Pollitz's grievance and stated that they too had been pressured by city officials not to offer movies showing racial integration. One recalled that before the 1954 Supreme Court integration decision the film "Pinky" played in Jackson without incident, but he "couldn't touch that movie with a ten-foot pole now." Yet another reported that while theaters all over the country were clamoring for *The Defiant Ones* with Tony Curtis and black star Sidney Poitier, there were no plans to book it for Jackson because its presentation wouldn't be allowed.<sup>129</sup>

On August 30, 1960, *State Times* editor Oliver Emmerich warned of a growing spirit of "book-burning" within the state. He specifically mentioned the official force exerted on the operators of the Varia and Skyvue drive-ins not to show "I Passed for White," a film dealing with the forbidden topic of interracial marriage. Ironically, Emmerich, known then and later as something of a "moderate" on racial matters, called the movie "a screen sermon on the rightness of racial integrity [that] could be appropriately sponsored by the Citizens' Council." Emmerich concluded his editorial by asking if Jackson "really wanted censorship?"<sup>130</sup>—a rhetorical question that Jacksonians were never given opportunity to answer. Yielding to City Hall pressure, the operators of the two drive-ins cancelled plans to show the disputed movie.<sup>131</sup>

In the summer of 1958 a controversy between City Hall and local movie managers erupted over Sunday showings that conflicted with the state's "blue laws." The fracas started when city police, acting on the

<sup>129</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, March 9, 1959. Pollitz may have been more outspoken and forthright than other theater managers because he knew the Royal was about to close anyway.

<sup>130</sup> *State Times*, August 30, 1960.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, September 1, 1960.

complaint of some churches or church members, arrested theater employees for showing movies during Sunday night worship service hours, i.e., between 6:00 and 9:00 p.m. Jim DeNeve, by this time part-owner of Jackson's four drive-ins and Mississippi manager of Gulf Theaters, Inc., of which they were a part, complained that the laws were being selectively enforced, and signed an affidavit charging Mayor Thompson and the City Golf Pro with operating public facilities on Sunday in violation of the "blue laws." In late August 1959 the city announced a "get-tough" policy in enforcement of the Sunday blue laws, that pretty much prohibited the selling of everything except counter food service and medicine. The crack-down generated a drive to relax or abolish all the restrictions. Some theater employees had to stand trial, but were found innocent. Most of the charges, however, were simply dropped—as were those against the Mayor and City Golf Pro.<sup>132</sup>

Jackson's two remaining white downtown movie theaters, the Paramount and Lamar, managed to survive the sixties and endured into the seventies. The black Alamo on Farish Street made it into the eighties. The Ebony, on the other hand, went out of business around 1962 or 1963.<sup>133</sup> During the sixties and seventies, drive-in theaters, earlier regarded as sort of a last hope for the movie industry, succumbed to economic pressures and relaxed social mores, which decreased their importance as venues for unsupervised teenage privacy.<sup>134</sup>

The fate of Jackson's four oldest drive-ins precisely mirrored this national trend. The oldest, originally known as the "Drive-In" and later the "80," was the first to go.<sup>135</sup> The second-oldest, the "51," was the next to close, not long after the presentation of the film *The Horror at Party*

<sup>132</sup> Newspaper accounts of the scuffle between City Hall and local theater operators can be found in the *Clarion-Ledger* of August 19, 1958, and July 7, August 8, August 25, August 29, August 30, and 31, 1959, and in the *State Times* of November 19, 1959.

<sup>133</sup> The Ebony is listed in the *1962 Jackson City Directory* but not in the *1963 Jackson City Directory*.

<sup>134</sup> Goulden, *Best Years*, 204; Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 255; Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 160-70; Margolies and Gwathmey, *Ticket to Paradise*, 21-22. The "Drive-Ins" article in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Charles Wilson and William Ferris, editors (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 598, describes drive-in movie theaters, popularly known as "passion pits," as a new form of entertainment based on the automobile. They reached the peak of popularity in the 1950s and often served as a central locale for teenage courtship and sexual adventure. By the late 1980s they had become practically extinct.

<sup>135</sup> It evidently ceased operations in either 1961 or 1962. It is not listed in the *1962 Jackson City Directory*.

*Beach*.<sup>136</sup> The Skyvue continued operations until 1965 or 1966. The Varia Drive-In continued to appear in Jackson city directories through 1972, but it may well have ceased operations before then. By 1970 its ads no longer appeared in the morning *Clarion-Ledger*. New drive-ins, such as the Showtown, with its Rebel and Bulldog screens, were constructed in the late sixties and were in operation about ten years.

Meanwhile, in 1962 Ad Orkin's Cinema Guild, Inc., reopened the old suburban Pix Theater in Fondren as the Capri. The Capri did well for a while and, in fact, had a longer history than its predecessor, but in August 1980 Orkin shut it down for economic reasons. The Capri reopened under different ownership in November 1980 but evidently had to rely on "cheap porno flicks," cult classics, and foreign films (the Maysles Brothers' *Gimme Shelter*, Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* and Werner Hertzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre*, for example) to stay in business until its closure in the mid-eighties.<sup>137</sup> By this time, the Lamar, Paramount, and Alamo finally succumbed to the same pressures that had previously forced the closure of the other downtown theaters. The Lamar evidently shut down in early October 1976 after a week-long presentation of *Jaws*.<sup>138</sup> The almost thirty-year-old building had a brief history as a disco club<sup>139</sup> and later as a "concert hall" before falling victim to the wrecking ball.<sup>140</sup> The forty-one-year-old Paramount Theater presented its final performance on February 17, 1979, "a victim of downtown deterioration, competition from suburban theaters and the city's planned redevelopment of Capitol

<sup>136</sup> Thomas Spengler, "Jackson Notes," *Delta Review*, Vol. I, No. 4 (Fall 1964), 9. According to Spengler, the site of the already-out-of-business "51" was to be razed for the construction of a shopping center. The future Meadowbrook Cinema was located on or very near the site of the old "51" drive-in..

<sup>137</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, August 15, 1980; November 14, 1980; and August 15, 1999. The reference to "cheap porno flicks" comes from an irate letter to "Jack Sunn" in the *Jackson Daily News*, May 11, 1984. Other film titles provided by Jacksonian Christine Wilson, who attended these films.

<sup>138</sup> This is inferred from the fact that Lamar ads for "Jaws" ran in the *Clarion-Ledger* from October 1 through October 7, 1976. There are no Lamar ads from October 8 through the remainder of the month, nor are they any to be discerned in December 1976. The Lamar, however, does appear in the 1976 *Jackson City Directory*, but not after that.

<sup>139</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, March 12, 1979. According to this article, the Lamar closed in the summer of 1977, but the present author has found no Lamar ads from that period. There is also a very brief mention of the Lamar's conversion into a disco club in Naylor's *American Picture Palaces*, 210.

<sup>140</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, March 27, 1983. This story states that the Lamar Theater closed in 1975 and that the "Disco" lasted for only eight months before closing in November 1979. The "concert club" operated from 1980 to January 19, 1983.

Street.”<sup>141</sup> The Alamo evidently remained in business until around 1982 or 1983 before it too called it quits.<sup>142</sup>

The establishment of a number of small shopping-center movie houses helped hasten the demise of the downtown theaters and also filled the vacuum caused by their loss. These tiny “shoebox” theaters contained little more than seating, screens, and simple concession stands, but they were closer to suburban residential neighborhoods, the parking was easier, and were considered safer than downtown city streets.<sup>143</sup> Jackson had several such establishments in the last three decades of the twentieth century—some, like the Deville Cinema on I-55 North, of relatively long duration.<sup>144</sup>

In the 1970s Jackson joined the national trend toward the construction of multi-screen cinema complexes. A single theater housing up to eighteen screens became the norm. This meant more screens housed in fewer buildings.<sup>145</sup> Jackson never had an eighteen-screen theater, but it did have Meadowbrook Cinema Six, Metrocenter Four, and several other multi-screen theaters. Larger complexes were eventually built in the Jackson metropolitan area, but beyond the corporate limits of Jackson itself.<sup>146</sup>

As the neighborhoods around Jackson’s older shopping centers deteriorated and the more affluent city dwellers fled to the suburbs of Madison or Rankin Counties, the shopping center movie houses began to feel the pinch. One of the last to survive was Meadowbrook Cinema Six. It closed in May 1996 but reopened under new management in

<sup>141</sup> MDAH Subject File—“Jackson Theatres.” This file contains a cross-reference to a *Clarion-Ledger* article of February 18, 1979, but that issue is missing from the microfilm files. Evidently Kennington Investment Company sold the Paramount to the Jackson Redevelopment Authority in 1977. This agency then leased it to Plitt Southern, which operated the theater until it closed. *Clarion-Ledger*, February 23, 1979. About eight to ten years prior to these events, ABC Mid-South Theaters, Inc., had acquired a “long-term” lease on the Paramount. *Clarion-Ledger-Jackson Daily News*, January 9, 1969.

<sup>142</sup> The Alamo is shown in the combined *1979-1980 Jackson City Directory* but not in the *1983 Jackson City Directory*. The latter lists the Alamo address at 335 North Farish Street as “vacant.”

<sup>143</sup> Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, 174.

<sup>144</sup> The Deville began operations in 1969 and closed in 1996. *Clarion-Ledger*, June 28, 1996.

<sup>145</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 181-82.

<sup>146</sup> In 1996, a United Artist district manager said his corporation was not interested in building any theater with fewer than eight screens. *Clarion-Ledger*, June 28, 1996.



April 1998 to join Metrocenter Four as the only two movie theaters still operating within the Jackson city limits.<sup>147</sup> Neither endured for long.

In contrast to the demise of elaborate downtown cinemas like the Paramount and Lamar, the sense of loss of these shopping center movie houses—architecturally unremarkable, inside and out—was not great. They were not unlike the current establishments in Clinton, Pearl, Flowood, and Ridgeland. Today's modern multiplex theaters stress fast and efficient service, things like crowd queuing and control, rather than relaxation in fine surroundings. In the "old days" fifty years ago, movie theaters were not emptied after each performance. Rather, patrons would often stroll in during the middle of a show and stay until the part where they had come in, or even longer if they liked. Today, the emphasis is on getting the customers in, encouraging them to patronize the concession stand, seating them, and then getting them out as quickly as possible. Contemporary seating is a far cry from the soft velvet-covered seats of the old movie palaces. Theater floors are seldom carpeted anymore, apart from "industrial" carpeting over concrete flooring. Instead one must usually maneuver across concrete that is sticky from spilt soft drinks. Present-day theaters fall far short of the old business maxim that a theater "should represent to the less favored of its patrons, something finer and more desirable than their ordinary surroundings; and to the better class, it should never present itself as inferior to the environment to which such persons are accustomed."<sup>148</sup>

Considering the bland character of modern movie houses and the restless nature of most audiences, it is hardly surprising that a growing number of Americans now prefer to watch movies in the comfort of their own homes. Renting or checking out videos is an experience much like going to the library and, in fact, that's where many people go to get their movies.<sup>149</sup>

Roy Oldenburg in his book lamenting the decline of community spirit in contemporary America said the following about taverns: that people

<sup>147</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, April 4, 1998.

<sup>148</sup> Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 21.

<sup>149</sup> Circulation of non-book materials constituted twenty-one percent of public library circulation for the period from October 1, 2002, to September 30, 2003. Mississippi public libraries possess 193,186 video recordings. "Mississippi Public Library Statistics: Annual Report of Mississippi Public Library Statistics, October 1, 2002, to September 30, 2003," Jackson: Mississippi Library Commission, 17-18. The author is grateful to Dr. Terry Latour, former director of the Delta State University Library, for this information.

who cannot envision good ones are “doomed to have lesser ones.”<sup>150</sup> Perhaps the same is true of theaters. It may be difficult for people under fifty to imagine theaters like the Alamo, Lamar, and the Paramount, but those over sixty remember them and miss them. With all the talk about rejuvenating downtown Jackson, it would be nice if plans included the construction of a grand old movie palace instead of the bandbox affairs the public has had to endure for the last several decades. But since realistic businessmen and investors cannot afford to take a “build it and they will come” approach, it seems that the magnificent movie theaters of years past will not return anytime soon, if ever.

<sup>150</sup> Roy Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 99.